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Similarities and Differences in Students' and Parents' Perceptions of the Transition from Middle School to High School

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Abstract

The study examined students' and parents' perceptions of the transition from middle school to high school in a large public school district in the Midwest. Mean comparisons of student and parent responses to the *Perceptions of Transition Survey* revealed similarities and differences in academic, social, and organizational areas. Students looked forward to making new friends and having a voice in selecting academic courses. Parents were concerned about social and safety issues, while students worried about too much homework and organizational issues such as getting lost. The findings can be used to help the school district evaluate the effectiveness of its transition materials and programming.

Introduction

Widespread interest in adolescent development is evidenced by countless scholarly and self-help books written specifically for parents, teachers, and youth. Books including *Chicken Soup for the Teenage Soul* (Canfield, Hansen, & Kirberger, 1997) and *7 Habits of Highly Effective Teens* (Covey, 1998) have gained instant popularity. In addition, numerous journals are devoted to disseminating research findings that assist secondary school teachers and counselors in working with adolescents. Although a wealth of information exists, adolescents confront personal and developmental challenges for which no single remedy exists. Adolescence is often considered a period of storm and stress, but little evidence suggests that adolescents experience significantly more stress than people proceeding through other periods of life (Steinberg, 2001). However, a major transition, such as the transition from middle school to high school, is likely to be accompanied by both anticipation and anxiety (Mizelle & Irvin, 2000; Morgan & Hertzog, 2001; Zeedyk, Gallacher, Henderson, Hope, Husband, & Lindsay, 2003). Schiller (1999) defines academic transition as “a *process* during which institutional and social factors influence which students' educational careers are positively or negatively affected by this movement between organizations” (pp. 216-217). The transition to high school is receiving increased attention because ninth grade failure and dropout rates exceed those rates at

all other grade levels (Hertzog & Morgan, 1998; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2003; Roderick & Camburn, 1999).

Educational transitions present challenges for students, parents, teachers, and guidance counselors. For example, a difficult transition from eighth grade to ninth grade is associated with achievement loss (Alspaugh, 1998a, 1998b; Isakson & Jarvis, 1999), increased behavior problems (Graber & Brooks-Gunn, 1996), and high school dropout (Smith, 1997). Students' perception of *what high school is going to be like* consists of potential differences in academic, social, and organizational factors (Akos & Galassi, 2004). Perceptual learning theory helps to explain how disconnect from current perceptions (beliefs at the end of middle school) to reality (experiences in high school) is thought to impact students' affect and academic achievement (Gibson, 1969). Students must identify the distinctive features of academic, social, and organizational features in high school. The complexities of the *distinctive features*, combined with the mixed messages from peers, parents, teachers, and others, are related to disconnect in one or more of the three areas.

Zeedyk et al. (2003) demonstrated perceptual disconnect in the academic and social arenas. Prior to high school, students in the study cited academic ability as singularly important to be successful. However, upon entering high school, students listed time management, ability to stay on task, social skills, and appropriate behavior as essential components. Academic issues lagged in importance behind social matters such as concerns about bullying and establishing peer relationships (Zeedyk et al.).

Isakson and Jarvis (1999) conducted a short-term, longitudinal study that examined the relationships among eighth grade affective characteristics such as autonomy, stress, coping skills, support from peers and family, and students' high school performance (i.e., measured by GPA), attendance, and school membership. Low levels of autonomy were associated with higher GPAs and a sense of belonging in school, while high levels of support from peers and high levels of stress were associated with lower ninth grade GPAs. Students in the study experienced increased levels of stress at the beginning of the ninth grade that diminished by the end of ninth grade. The study is important because it demonstrates how students respond to a new academic and social environment. The finding that a lower level of autonomy was associated with a positive transition to high school is not surprising since students in early adolescence are setting the stage for confronting identity development (Boyes & Chandler, 1992).

Compounding the actual similarities and differences between middle school and high school are parents', peers', and teachers' perspectives of transition that bombard students (Barber, Eccles, & Stone, 2001). Akos and Galassi (2004) compared students', parents', and teachers' retrospective perceptions of the transitional aspects that they *looked forward to* or *worried about*. Students looked forward to making new friends, gaining independence, and attending school events. Teachers and parents were looking forward to their students/children forming new friendships and having increased opportunities for extra-curricular activities. The top three concerns for students included the amount of homework, an increase in academic difficulty, and getting lost. In addition to being worried about the amount of homework, the majority of parents reported being concerned that their children would feel pressure to do well in school and would experience negative peer pressure.

Facilitating Seamless Transitions

Several factors can help ease the challenges of transition. Morgan and Hertzog (2001) found that high school dropout rates were significantly lower in schools with explicit transition programs. Effective transition programs provide details about the curriculum (e.g., academic rigor of courses); quality of facilities (e.g., location of classrooms, restrooms, etc.); safety and discipline (e.g., rules and discipline code); and accurate information (e.g., organization and logistics). Similarly, Roderick and Camburn (1999) reported that transition programs that intentionally provide early interventions for ninth grade students experiencing failure have shown promising results in reducing high school dropout rates. Transitional programs should also involve collaboration between middle schools, high schools, and families (Mizelle, 1999). Falbo, Lein, and Amador (2001) interviewed 26 parents to understand the ways in which they helped their children during the transition to high school. The major themes that emerged included monitoring activities, evaluating academic experiences, and being involved in the school (e.g., school work, peer networks, and direct participation at the school).

While interest in studying academic transition is growing, research on the topic has been limited. The goal of the current study was to gain a better understanding of how students and parents view the transition from middle school to high school. The following research question guided the inquiry: What are the similarities and differences in students' and parents' perceptions of the transition from middle school to high school?

Method

Setting

The study was conducted in a large public school district in the Midwest. The district is located between a large urban district to the south and several sprawling suburbs to the north. The students in the current study transitioned from one of three middle schools to a large high school with more than 3,000 students. The district sponsored several transition to high school activities throughout the eighth grade. For example, it hosted a "Curriculum Night" that filled to capacity the high school's large auditorium. After the Parent Teacher Association's (PTA) president and the high school principal provided an introduction, the parents and students toured different areas of the building to learn about various curricular options. Several times during eighth grade, high school students, teachers, and guidance counselors talked with the middle school students about their upcoming transition. More than 80% of the eighth grade students also attended one of the four summer orientation programs. Orientation activities included scavenger hunts and frank discussions about school rules and academic expectations. The students who led the orientation used skits and open forums to stimulate conversations about academics, extra-curricular opportunities, and school resources.

Participants

Participants in the study included 40 students and their parents. Slightly more than 60% were female. The sample included 68% White, 26% African American, 3% Asian, and 3% Multi-Racial students. The average eighth grade GPA for the sample was 2.92. In comparison to the total eighth grade population in the district, the sample was under-represented by African American students (47%), Latino students (5%), and students receiving free or reduced lunch (40%).

Measure

The *Perceptions of Transition Survey* was developed from the research of Akos and Galassi (2004). The original survey consisted of 35 items that prompted participants to reflect on their transition to high school. Each item was worded to use a four-point response format (1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *agree*, 4 = *strongly agree*) to increase variability and item reliability. Parent and student surveys contain common subscales, measuring the extent to which participants are *looking forward to* ($\alpha = .82$) and *worried about* ($\alpha = .94$) academic, social, and organizational aspects of high school. The 15 phrases that students and parents look forward to include organizational items (e.g., *being in a larger school*), social items (e.g., *making new friends*), and academic items (e.g., *taking classes in new subjects*). The 13 phrases that students and parents may be worried about include organizational items (e.g., *getting lost*), social items (e.g., *fitting in*), and academic items (e.g., *too much homework*). Students completed the survey at school during May of their eighth grade year. Parents received a letter from the principal inviting them to participate in the study and then completed the survey at home and returned it to the university via mail.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were calculated for parents and students on each item and for overall subscales. Independent *t*-tests were conducted for each item and to determine if mean differences were significant. A multivariate analysis that simultaneously compared the estimated means of parents' and students' responses on the subscales was performed. The dependent variables were the average scores on the two subscales. A Holm-modified Bonferroni correlation was applied to protect against inflated *p*-values for small sample sizes (Jaccard & Guilamo-Ramos, 2002).

Results

Parents and students reported high levels of confidence regarding the transition to high school. Mean comparisons on subscales and individual items demonstrate areas of convergence and divergence between parents' and students' perceptions of academic, social, and organizational opportunities and challenges in the transition from middle school to high school.

Looking forward to. In the aggregate, students' scores on the *looking forward to* subscale were significantly higher than parents' scores ($F = 5.54$, $p < .01$). Students gave higher ratings than their parents on 10 out of the 13 items (see Table 1). Students rated two organizational issues (i.e., *being in a large school* and *having more choices for lunch*) significantly higher than their parents. In the social realm, significant differences emerged on the items *being around older students* and *being around more students*. Students were looking forward to interacting with older peers ($M = 3.13$) and more students ($M = 3.37$), while their parents were less excited about the prospects of their children being around older students ($M = 2.53$) and more students ($M = 2.87$). Both parents and students reported equally high scores on the remaining social items: *making new friends*, *attending school events*, and *participating in extra-curricular activities*. Discrepancies emerged in students' and parents' perceptions regarding the academic issue of choice. Students' scores on the items *freedom to choose academic plan* and *freedom to chose some classes* were significantly higher than their parents' scores. Nevertheless, parents still rated both items high ($M = 3.45$ on both items). Parents reported significantly higher scores than students on the item *having new teachers* ($M = 3.45$; $M = 3.18$, respectively). Both parents and students reported equally high scores on the remaining academic items, *getting good grades* and *taking classes in new subjects*.

Table 1
Mean Comparison on the "Looking Forward to" Items

Item	Parent		Student	
	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation
Being in a large school	2.58	0.79	3.03*	0.72
Freedom to choose academic plan	3.45	0.55	3.71*	0.46
Being around more students	2.87	0.84	3.37**	0.59
Freedom to choose some classes	3.45	0.50	3.71*	0.46
Being around older students	2.53	0.73	3.13***	0.62
Making new friends	3.34	0.48	3.55	0.50
Taking classes in new subjects	3.55	0.55	3.37	0.63
Having new teachers	3.45	0.50	3.18*	0.61
Participating in extra-curricular activities	3.55	0.50	3.53	0.56
Getting good grades	3.66	0.48	3.68	0.47
New students	3.34	0.58	3.46	0.55
More choices for lunch	3.12	0.63	3.48**	0.55
Attending school events	3.42	0.50	3.55	0.60
Subscale average	3.25	0.31	3.44	0.30

Note: Higher scores indicate higher levels of looking forward to.

* $p \leq .05$ ** $p \leq .01$ *** $p \leq .001$

Worried about. The overall mean difference between parents and students on the *worried about* subscale was not significantly different ($F = 1.14, p = .30$). Students reported higher levels of concern than their parents on 8 of the 15 items (see Table 2). Students were significantly more concerned about the organizational issues of *getting lost* and *finding their way around*. While there was no difference on the third organizational item of negotiating *new rules*, differences between students and parents emerged on social issues related to safety. Parents' ratings were significantly higher than the students' on the items *being bullied* ($M = 2.55; M = 1.50$, respectively) and *being safe* ($M = 2.50; M = 1.55$, respectively). Additionally, parental concern about *peer pressure* and their children being *accepted by other students* was significantly higher than students. There were no differences on the remaining two social items, *fitting in* and *getting along with other students*. Only one significant discrepancy emerged on the six academic items. Parents were more worried than students about feeling *peer pressure to do well in classes*. It is noteworthy that students' scores on the academic items were generally higher than their scores on the organizational and social items. The greatest areas of worry for students appear to be around the issue of *having too much homework* ($M = 2.97$), *difficulty of teachers* ($M = 2.72$) and the *difficulty of classes* in general ($M = 2.72$). Parents' scores on the three items were slightly, but not significantly, lower than students' scores.

Table 2
Mean Comparison on the "Worried About" Items

Item	Parent		8th Grade Student	
	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation
Finding way around	2.24	0.85	2.70*	0.90
Getting along with other students	2.24	0.88	2.11	0.86
Parent pressure to do well in classes	2.26	1.00	2.50	0.80
Difficult teachers	2.45	0.62	2.72	0.63
Being bullied	2.55	0.84	1.50	0.65
Fitting in	2.32	0.85	1.95	0.84
Peer pressure to do well in classes	2.07	0.95	1.66**	0.89
Being safe	2.50	0.86	1.50	0.73
New rules	2.11	0.75	2.13	0.84
Too much homework	2.63	0.75	2.97	0.88
Peer pressure socially	2.89	0.95	1.97***	0.85
Accepted by other students	2.45	0.86	1.99*	0.92
Getting lost	2.03	0.75	2.63**	1.10
Teacher pressure to do well	2.24	0.75	2.34	0.94
Difficult classes	2.47	0.95	2.72	0.79
Subscale average	2.36	0.57	2.22	0.55

Note: Higher scores indicate an increased level of concern or worry about the item.

* $p \leq .05$ ** $p \leq .01$ *** $p \leq .001$

Discussion

The study represents an important first step in a comprehensive examination of students' and parents' perceptions of the transition from middle school to high school. Studying student and parent perceptions prior to the transition to high school can provide schools with important information regarding the consistency, value, and impact of transition programs and materials. Parents need access to accurate information regarding the academic and organizational changes that their children are likely to experience. It may not be possible for parents or other school staff members to describe accurately or to prepare students for all the nuances of academic, social, and organizational changes. However, if school staff members within and across buildings present consistent messages about the similarities and differences in the three areas, it is assumed that students will encounter less disconnect between their expectations and experiences.

Overall, students and parents were excited about the opportunities available in the high school setting. The students' high ratings on the *looking forward to* subscale may reflect some unrealistic expectations, particularly on social items. Interpreted through the lens of perception theory (Gibson, 1969), students and parents may not fully appreciate the distinctive features of high school. Transition to college research shows that unmet expectations were associated with academic difficulties (Smith & Wertlieb, 2005).

Student perceptions in the current study generally align with the findings of Akos and Galassi (2004). Modifying the items from a checklist to a Likert-type scale provides for meaningful subscale and item comparisons. Students' greatest concerns were in the area of academic course difficulty and organizational issues such as getting lost. Simultaneously, they looked forward to increased independence in choosing courses and developing an academic plan. While students looked forward to this new independence, it is unlikely that they appreciate the gravity of the curricular choices in their academic arena. For example, the level of mathematics courses taken in eighth and ninth grade rank among the strongest predictors of college attendance and completion (Ingels, et al., 2002). Therefore, along with freedom and independence comes responsibility and consequences; these distinctive features of the academic changes from eighth grade to high school cannot be understated.

Both students and parents reported that they looked forward to *participating in extra-curricular activities* and *getting good grades*. This may reflect expectation-reality disconnect in social and academic experiences. Previous research and anecdotal evidence in local high schools shows that achievement loss is a normative part of the transition (Alspaugh, 1998a, 1998b; Isakson & Jarvis, 1999), but students and their parents expect similar or better academic performance in high school. Some students will experience lower grades or will fail tests early in the ninth grade, which may shake their academic self efficacy (Graham, 1997). Similarly, students who were active and excelled in extra-curricular activities such as athletics, music, and student government may be shocked to find that relatively few ninth grade students obtain starting positions, leading roles, first chair status, and/or a place on the student council. What happens to students who, potentially for the first time, are *let down* socially or academically? On the other hand, some students underestimate the opportunities and are pleasantly surprised with the increased number of social groups or cliques, variety of clubs, and course options that stimulate their intellect (Kinney, 1993). These students also failed to appreciate the distinctive features of high school, assuming it would be more of the same. A third situation is that students' perceptions will be relatively close to the reality they experience. A follow-up, longitudinal study using surveys, focus group discussions, and interviews is expected to address the extent to which disconnect between expectations and reality are associated with academic and social development.

Limitations

The results of the study must be considered in the context of its limitations. First, a major challenge occurred in obtaining consent for student and parent participation. A consent form was sent home with a letter from the principal and a self-addressed return envelope. After consulting with counselors and principals, it was clear that parents were confused with the legalese language of the Institutional Review Board's (IRB's) required elements for parental consent and student assent to participate. The sample was under-represented by students

of color and students receiving free or reduced lunch. Efforts to increase involvement for all students and their parents included translating the consent into Spanish, setting up a table at school registration and open houses, and having principals provide additional support for participation in school newsletters and through a personal note. The limited sample size has implications for generalizability within and beyond the district. Second, the single measurement instrument was adopted from a checklist format and lacks extensive evidence of its psychometric properties. Needed are a confirmatory factor analysis and the stable internal consistency of the subscales estimate that the tool can assess student and parent perceptions of the transition from middle school to high school. Future survey administrations with larger sample sizes are necessary to perform further statistical tests for validity and reliability. The results represent the first step in a comprehensive study of the transition from middle school to high school. In addition to administering and analyzing perception surveys, interview and focus protocols were piloted with teachers, students, principals, and guidance counselors. A preliminary analysis of the verbatim transcripts confirms that the protocols are suitable measures tapping participants' perceptions.

Implications for Practice

The study has implications for understanding transition issues in this school and across similar schools in the Midwest region. Locally, school administrators and guidance counselors have received important feedback about the students' and parents' perceptions of the transition. The district can use the data to see how parents and students learn from the transition activities offered by the school. They will use the data to reflect on what aspects of transition programming need to be revisited. For instance, communicating with parents has been a challenge, and the school is interested in expanding its popular orientation program to include a parent component. The district spent a considerable amount of time and effort initiating and monitoring transition programming. However, their approach is the exception rather than the norm (Smith, 1997). The results of the study indicate the need to further implement and evaluate transition programs throughout the state.

Continued examination of the students' and parents' perceptions of transition can provide other districts with the necessary data to inform decisions regarding the development and implementation of transition programming in their respective schools. On a broader scale, schools across the country are revisiting school configurations. Districts are reorganizing schools in a variety of ways such as K-12, small schools, and ninth grade Freshmen Centers. Though calls for eliminating the middle school concept arise, little evidence is cited to support the movement away from the middle school model toward other learning configurations. Prior to making sweeping changes in configurations, schools could benefit from examining the extensive literature on facilitating the transition to college. Colleges have implemented first-year experience seminars to acclimate students to the academic, social, and organizational differences in college (Keup & Barefoot, 2005). Schools that conduct action research on their students' and parents' perceptions can identify discrepancies in order to modify their existing transition programs. Additionally, there is ample evidence that making connections with adults (e.g., faculty, advisor, and counselor) in college is associated with higher retention rates. This may be true for the high school transition, as well. For example, some high schools are moving toward an academic advisement model that mirrors the college experience (Newman, Lohman, Newman, Myers, & Smith, 2000). Teachers are responsible for a cadre of 10–15 students and make efforts to connect with parents as students navigate curricular decisions and experience challenges in ninth grade.

Another contribution of the study is the development of the instrument's ability to better measure the similarities and differences in students' and parents' perceptions of the transition to high school. Adequate internal consistency indices of the *looking forward to* and *worried about* subscales suggest that the survey is a useful method for understanding student and parent perceptions of the transition from middle school to high school.

If schools are serious about facilitating seamless transitions from middle school to high school, they should collect, analyze, and use data to inform decisions about the type of programs that will reduce the expectation-reality gap. The current study provides a model for undertaking such a study, and future inquiries will expand the data collection to include multiple stakeholders including teachers, principals, and guidance counselors.

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